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DISCUSSION RESPONSE

Who may see the Acropolis? Global patterns of inequality and the right to tourism

LENA LAUBE — 16 November, 2017

In her contribution on the newly created right to tourism, Sabrina Tremblay-Huet convincingly states, that the social and economic phenomenon of tourism has been widely disregarded by the social sciences, law and philosophy due to the focus of the academia on migration. However, there are many reasons to highlight the growing relevance of tourism in world society: First, the tourist sector generates by now 10 percent of the world's GDP. Second, many formerly closed or remote societies began to embrace international tourist flows to benefit from the global exchange of customers, goods, services and attention. Moreover, cross-border mobility of persons has been widely acknowledged as one decisive dimension of a globalized world. Thus, tourism ought to be recognized as an essential facet of globalization, as its importance is not only stressed by its numbers, but also by its influence on other forms of mobility, such as migration.

Over the last years, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) drafted a *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* and intends to transform it into a binding *Convention on Tourism Ethics*, which will then be the first International Convention under their aegis. In Article 10 (1) of the draft version, it says: "The prospect of direct and personal access to the discovery and enjoyment of the planet's resources constitutes a right equally open to all the world's inhabitants".

In her analysis of the soon-to-be right to tourism, which can be deduced from the human right to rest and leisure, Tremblay-Huet shows a clear sense of inequalities and injustice. This leads to her assumption that "the right to tourism is reserved to the leisure class". The concept of the "leisure class" is based on the work *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* of the American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen (1899). It carries the connotation of a (bigger or smaller) part of a community or national society that is able to afford a privileged and lazy way of life, implying that the leisure class is able to travel the world since they possess the social, financial and employment means to do so.

But how do we define today's leisure class in a global perspective? For Tremblay-Huet, it is those who can take the role of consumers on the global tourism market. However, this

does not have to be an upper class of – at least – every country worldwide. As Branko Milanovic (2015) has shown in *Global Inequality of Opportunity: How Much of Our Income is Determined by Where We Live?*, the global distribution of income and wealth is determined even more by location than by class differences within countries. Thus, strictly speaking, it is more adequate to assume that it is the Western industrialized countries or the Global North as a whole that constitute that leisure class profiting from the right to tourism.

Moreover, the freedom to travel implicates additional restrictive dimensions such as legal barriers. The movement of bodies across borders always implies the sovereign decision of a nation state to regulate such a flow across its borders. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 13 the individual right "to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." Still, there is no corresponding right to enter another country. Thus, the opportunity to be an international tourist and to visit certain destinations worth seeing heavily depends on the person's nationality and the mobility rights attached to his or her passport.

Although it is widely believed that tourists belong to the generally "wanted" group of border-crossers, states heavily affect these flows by establishing visa application procedures. Those who have to apply for a tourist visa are often thoroughly checked. Applicants have to give proof of their ability to support themselves and to return. Once there is any evidence that they might be a risk to national security or that they intend to violate the visa regulations, state authorities will dismiss the application. The application process, which is costly and time-consuming, puts a burden on the citizens of many countries. For them, "access to the discovery and enjoyment of the planet's resources" (Article 10 (1) of the draft convention) can be denied. The differentiation between those who may travel visa-free to many places and those who have to pass inspections wherever they wish to go constitutes a "global mobility divide". As Steffen Mau et al. (2015, p. 1211) pointed out in *The Global Mobility Divide: How Visa Policies Have Evolved over Time*, citizens from Ireland, Denmark and Sweden enjoyed visa-free travel to at least 80 other countries in 2010, while citizens from Somalia and Afghanistan had only one option (to Haiti) to travel abroad without having to apply for a visa first. Based on these historically developed structures, visa policies have become a legitimate way of discriminating against certain groups of potential tourists on the grounds of nationality.

To let "all the world's inhabitants" (Article 10 (1) of the draft convention) equally take part in international tourist flows, destination countries should abolish this unequal distribution of mobility rights. The Convention on Tourism Ethics only touches upon that important topic once, by stating broadly: "Administrative procedures relating to border crossings (…) such as visas or health and customs formalities, should be adapted, so far as possible, so as to facilitate to the maximum freedom of travel and widespread access to international tourism" (Article 11, 4 of the draft). But this cautious claim will not be enough if state authorities have to weigh up the individual will to visit the Rocky Mountains or the Acropolis with national reservations to give a person territorial access.

As long as those global inequality patterns will not change, it is the Global North benefitting from a right to tourism. By and large, the new right to tourism will support those who are already well-off and do not face legal restrictions to their freedom of movement. And while claiming an interest in sustainable development around the globe, the new Convention initiated by the UNWTO is very likely to add to the reproduction of global structures of inequality that, as Manuela Boatca concluded in *Global Inequalities beyond Occidentalism* (2015), still reflect former colonial relations.

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